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ABSTRACT

Mercy College in New York has devised a program that seeks to meet the special needs of returning adult students. To ease the restraints on the adult student's time and travel needs, the college holds classes in branches and extension centers throughout the urban area. It also offers eight-week courses that carry the same contact time requirements as the normal 16-week sessions, and offers courses during the spring, fall, and summer sessions. Two courses are required for incoming freshmen in the summer session--a reading/study skills course and a course in writing development. A noncredit freshman seminar is also required for the students. Each student is provided with a peer counselor to help in the transition to college life. Summer classes meet four days a week, with the fifth day, designated for cultural development, spent visiting museums, viewing plays, or engaging in other cultural activities. The needs of each student are diagnosed so that an individual plan for development can be prepared. To help the student in content area reading and study skills, the college uses a six-step procedure based on David Ausubel's concept of advanced organizers. The role of instructors is that of the goal-oriented, business-like classroom manager; however instructors must also serve as a source of enthusiasm and encouragement for the students. (FL)

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STRUCTURING AN ADULT LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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The idea of structuring an adult learning environment is both fascinating and presumptuous. On one hand it is fulfilling to be adaptive and creative enough to alter the walls of the classroom that will accommodate the multitude of students with their various needs and desires; on the other hand it is a bit arrogant to think that one can be aware of each individual's needs and still be able to cater to each of them at the same time. Yet that is what many educators attempt and accomplish on a daily basis.

This paper is an attempt to address the problems the instructor faces. The instructor is seen as an alchemist who blends together curriculum goals with learner needs in order to get that precious element: comprehension. The blend is crucial because simply addressing content area needs is not enough to meet the demands of the student. Indeed, the instructor must stand on the other side of the podium and experience some of the concerns of the student.

The adult who is returning to education often finds that he is entering a race with the bettor's odds stacked heavily against him. The race he is running is a kind of long-distance marathon because his goals are orientated to that end: that somewhere, long down the path, he will find his just reward. It is a marathon race, not a sprint or 100 yard dash. There is little in the way of immediate feedback or gratification from the crowd. The race can become intolerable as he finds himself running alongside his expectations. But most devasted is the adult who turns and finds his "running mate" is his former self - the adult he was in years past.

The first problem the adult faces is unlike those of the remedial student in school. Although both contend with competition from peers, the adult must also deal with his former self, the self that has been educated to some extent and has forgotten much. Because of this marked difference, materials designed specifically

for the adult are scarcer than might be imagined. The "low difficulty with high motivational interest" material that exists for secondary school students cannot be used. The adult is a generation apart in terms of his interests. The mere fact that the adult has been away from academia suggests that his vocabulary, although once broader, has now dwindled to words which he utilizes on a daily basis or words which reflect a specialized use according to the adult's line of employment.

This sorry position is not limitted to Educational Opportunity Programs. It is seen in the college undergraduate programs for the traditionally accepted student as well. Whether we cite the policy of open admissions, poor high school preparation, or poor socio-economic conditions, we are faced with students who lack the basic communication skills of reading and writing, but are motivated and enrolled in supportive educational programs.

The second problem stems from the fact that the adult must make long-term commitments and goals. The motivation which ushers him to the schoolhouse doors requires him to show a strong commitment. The responsibilities that the adult has weigh heavily on the amount of time that he may be able to invest. Aside from his general working hours, the adult usually has family needs as well as a personal requirement for leisure time in order to unwind. Although a return to reading may provide some form of escape from his mundane pressures, it is still an encroachment on time usually spent on releasing one's self from pressures and tension.

Short-term goals do not have to be totally sacrificed because they can be made relevant to a desired long-term commitment. Relevancy is the key to adult education. The adult may be a generation apart from the printed texts, but relevancy to his daily life or self-concept will spur him onward to learning. They also

allow him to work with his already hectic schedule instead of around it.

For example, many students see themselves reading a text in its entirety. One study skill, that of effective time management, would be to visualize the text in its unit parts. Not only does this give the student a handle on his work assignments, but it breaks down concepts and vocabulary into digestible portions.

A student in school has many motivations to guide him along: parental influence, the goal of getting a good job or into a good college, and, if nothing else, the fulfillment of a legal requirement and the attainment of a diploma.

The diploma may be considered as a tangible goal for students not only because it is a paper that they can touch and feel, but because along the way there are messages that announce its coming. Like the sprinter who gets audience applause, the student gets report cards and in-class feedback. The high school student also thinks in terms of unit completion; he needs so many credits of science to fill the academic requirements, etc. On the other hand, the adult is like the long-distance runner who must wait until the end of the race to hear the ovations and cross a finish line.

Malcolm Knowled in Kidd (1975) has stated:

> To be adult means to be self-directing. ...There develops in the human being a deep psychological need to be perceived by himself and by others as being indeed self-directing. This is the concept that lies at the basis of Andragogy. Andragogy is based upon the insight that the deepest need an adult has is to be treated as an adult, to be treated as a self-directing person, to be treated with respect. Andragogy is student-centered and problem orientated. (p.36)

The presumptuous quality of our task comes to the foreground: we feel that we can assess all of the desires and needs the our adult students and also be adaptive and creative enough to satisfy

them. We sometimes fail to remember that the adult population we service wants to have a part in decision-making. Still, there are three types of students we service. There are the two extremes: on the left there are those who reject our assistance and who, no matter how we try to catch them, will fall; on the right there are those who do not really need us and who, regardless of how little or how much support, will succeed. In the center is the body that we truly service. The core remainder are those who need our services and those who would not find college successful without us.

The problem is then one of defining the hurdles that the adult faces and then training the adult in order to make the leaps. The first step is often the initiative taken by the college. Mercy College, under the aggressive administration of President Donald Grunewald, has sought to do more than meet the student "half-way." The physical classroom has been brought to branches and extension centers that are located in business districts and urban communities. The need for time and transportation has been significantly reduced so that the adult's schedule has less restraints placed upon it. Also, there are eight-week courses that carry the same contact time requirements as the normal sixteen-week sessions. It has been found that many adults in the employment forces cannot commit beyond eight weeks because of job re-location or transfer of assignments. Although the commitment may be there, the ability to assume full control over one's time is limitted.

Commitment is another hurdle to be met. Mercy College accepts students during the summer, fall, and spring semesters. The summer entrant is the highest motivated. The student is pictured as giving up something of his own: the traditional "summer-off" vacation from school. The summer College Opportunity Program is highly structured and very intense. It is a microcosm for structuring an adult

learning environment for the full academic year.

Peer counselors are utilized to ease the transition to college life. For many of our students this is the first family member to attempt college and so the pressures are enormous. The peer counselors attend the classes along with the entering freshman and then offer tutoring and support where needed. They act as go-between for instructor and student and review lessons by re-phrasing and discussion of class events. They are the pressure valve for the student to admit anxiety and frustration. The peer counselors have been highly successful because they are former College Opportunity Program students who have been in the freshman's tenuous position before, but have succeeded and thus prove themselves as positive role models.

Three courses are offered to the incoming freshman during the summer. Only two are credit bearing; the third is freshman seminar. Freshman seminar is the vehicle for the full-time faculty of counselors to hold workshops for improvement of attitudes and study skills. Through these workshops the freshman hears his fellow classmates verbalize their concerns and then he comes to realize that he is not alone. Study skills are reviewed and practiced here. Often it is a matter of talking about positive attitudes and behaviors.

Study skills, vocabulary, and reading improvement are the true providence of one of the courses, Reading and Critical Thinking. The class asks the question "Why are you here?" Most likely the student has come to college to upgrade his job. The adult may feel inadequate with his friends who have more to talk about or who show a greater awareness of the world around them. Still, he may be a first-generation adult who has never had command of the English language and communication skills.

The student is shown how reading is not only a necessary part

of college life, but a real factor for success in the world outside of the college campus. It is this realization that provides extra motivation for reading improvement. Newspapers and weekly magazines are excellent sources of apporpriate materials if the reading difficulties do not exceed eighth grade reading. The New York Times does introduce new vocabulary, but is still manageable. In fact, it offers a weekly supplement form of a school edition "extra" that does not only define new terms, but gives the background behind current events that led to new developments and daily news topics. Texts used in the class include samplings from such authors as Steinbeck and Dumas as well as times reading passages with comprehension questions.

At the same time that comprehension is being developed in the reading class, the Writing Development class furthers the idea by dealing with problems such as verb and subject agreement, introductory sentences and topic paragraphs, and structured development of a five paragraph essay. The student sees a transition in content from one class to another. The team-teaching effect has a high yield of meaningfulness to learning. Often the two instructors are seen teaching together so that the student has a visual analogy of the pairing of the two content areas.

Because the summer program is so intense (four days of classes as opposed to the traditional three), one day is set aside as a cultural development day. Excursions to museums, plays, libraries, and cultural exhibits are made by the class. Again, the academic world is extended to the world of reality. Ideas and vocabulary are brought back into the classroom. Integration of learning is at a peak because the student has been allowed to experience learning.

Another approach towards structuring the adult learning environment is accentuating the positive while strengthening weak

skills. Here a package of evaluation must be made perhaps in the form of a study habits assessment (i.e. the SHAH Test), a comprehension check (i.e. The California Achievement Test), and a vocabulary inventory (i.e. Iowa Test of Basic Skills). The adult may then acquire a yardstick with which he can measure himself in terms of former self, present position, and progress along the way. This brief diagnostic sampling would provide information to the instructor who would help in individualizing the instruction according to the adult's needs.

The individualized plan for development is a part of the intensity of the summer program. "Lab" sessions are held for the students and "contracts" are jointly drawn with plans for remediation and instructional assessment. Again the andragogy of student being an active participant who is self-directing is satisfied.

The problem of competition with others and with the "former self" can be addressed. Aside from using the informal battery, another easy approach is the test and re-test method showing differences gained by putting a program of instruction into effect. A laboratory file is kept by the adult who may then log in his own scores and then be taught how to graph them. These figures do not necessarily have to be test scores. Any student may be shown how to graph his rate of reading, percentage of correct answers to comprehension questions, or multiple choice responses after the instructor has given him a brief rapid reading selection such as those found in the Essential Skills Series (Jamestown Publishers).

There is no reason why the tactics used to "hook" public school students cannot be applied with adults. The adults can get as much satisfaction out of book "trees." The adult can also formulate his own short-term goals in light of his own special needs. Diplomas may not be appropriate in all situations, but the fulfillment of a "contract" which both the instructor and the adult reader have filled out is as constructive and gives the tangible positive feedback of a diploma. A coffee party may be held as the class meets their half-way mark.

Vocabulary may be taught in this fashion as well. How many new words would the adult like to know after X period of time? Setting this goal is the same as setting behavioral objectives and can be measured in quantifiable terms in the form of an achievement test. The instruction may be done in families of words for derivation, root, prefix and suffix, and part of speech access, but will aid them in the quota. Structural analysis is a successful approach because it allows the adult to experience the vocabulary. Often selections from college introductory texts may be used.

Further instruction in vocabulary may be done in the formal teaching of how to unlock new vocabulary via word attack skills. It is easy to see one approach taking the form of separate lessons on configuration clues, contextual clues, word part clues, and picture clues. Again, teaching in teams has proven to be stimulating for the student. The Psychology or Sociology instructor can work together with the Reading and Writing staff. Content material can be ingested and rearticulated by the student on several occasions. Vocabulary can be re-introduced and fortified. Study techniques can be practiced using actual textbook assignments.

As we have recognized that the returning adult will have different vocabulary needs and levels of achievement, so too must one recognize that the returning adult will have different ways of organizing information. David Ausubel offers a concept of advanced organizers (1963) which provide a means of bringing the reading methodology together with the content course material.

In coining this term, Ausubel is using old knowledge as a foundation onto which the teacher may build by adding a structure for the retention and assimilation of the new knowledge. The catalyst to the process is making the new knowledge meaningful. This is readily seen in the use of outlining skills. Specifically, if the adult had an outline of the material prior to actually reading it, the gradual introduction of the new material would facilitate learning and retention.

Research and experimentation done by Helene Intraub at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1980) shows that brief presentation of cues enhances information retention. Although this is done with picture cues, her research shows that cognition can be enhanced; the presentation of cues applies to content material as well.

Taken through the entire sequence of operation, the practical application of Ausubel's theory involves the teacher and the student in a six-step procedure. First, the student is diagnosed for his current position in a progressively harder hierarchy of achievement levels. Second the instructor selects the appropriate skill from the process hierarchy. This interaction puts both the teacher and learner in an open, functional relation in which communication, understanding, and work are possible (Bugelski, 1964). As a throwback to the previously mentioned andragogy, both teacher

and student determine content to be studied. Because the teacher or facilitator recognizes that true learning incorporates more than cognition, the fourth step is undertaken: evaluate the student's affective needs. Again, learning new information is based on the premise that it will be meaningful. The affective domain supplies another avenue of approach. Step five sets up a strategy table for integrating skills, content procedures, and affective bahaviors. Finally, the instructor is ready to follow the teaching sequence: find the level, accomplish, and exit to new level.

Each of the skills necessary for reading comprehension and content course completion can be broken down into a task analysis that the adult can use as objectives in learning.

MAIN IDEA

1. Understanding sentence sense
2. Determining main idea of sentence
3. Seeing sentence interrelationship
4. Restating paragraph main idea

DETAILS

1. Abstracting details
2. Locating details through pre-set questions
3. Locating details through self-directed questions
4. Structuring details

OUTLINING

1. Categorizing
2. Using concrete objectives
3. Grouping under headings
4. Sequencing
5. Working with skeleton outlines
6. Creating an outline

7. Advanced outlining

SKIMMING AND SCANNING

1. Finding specific information
2. Determining appropriateness
3. Alternating strategies
4. Scanning

SUMMARY SKILLS

1. Summarizing illustrations
2. Utilizing maps, charts, and graphs
3. Differentiating generalizations from specific details
4. Answering specific summary types of questions
5. Abstracting
6. Concluding

This diagnostic process may be seen as a process which will also allow the teacher to tease out those content area skills the student needs to develop more fully. This second goal may be accomplished with either a standardized test or a teacher-made Informal Reading Inventory from the content area textbook. The critical point here is to isolate and group together students with the same kinds of content area needs.

Until now, the instructor has had little mention. However, at this point it is necessary to acknowledge that this giant effort made by the adult who is returning to school must be met and equalled by as colossal an effort in exercising creativity, sensitivity, and expertise. The instructor may be described as being a goal-orientated, business-like manager of the classroom because the instructor must be able to handle the paperwork involved in diagnosing, establishing procedures, recording data, and preparing for future classes. At the same time the instructor is the

sounding board for the adults who must air their questions and frustrations. The instructor is then a source of enthusiasm for any student; but once the adult is put on the right course around the track, the adult will be able to find the energy from within in order to get himself to the end of his vocational marathon.

These suggestions and observations have not addressed the instructor's style or method of instruction. Instead, they are intended to enable the instructor to become a coach in the "sport" of active learning.

SAMPLE LESSON PLAN

Lesson: Outlining

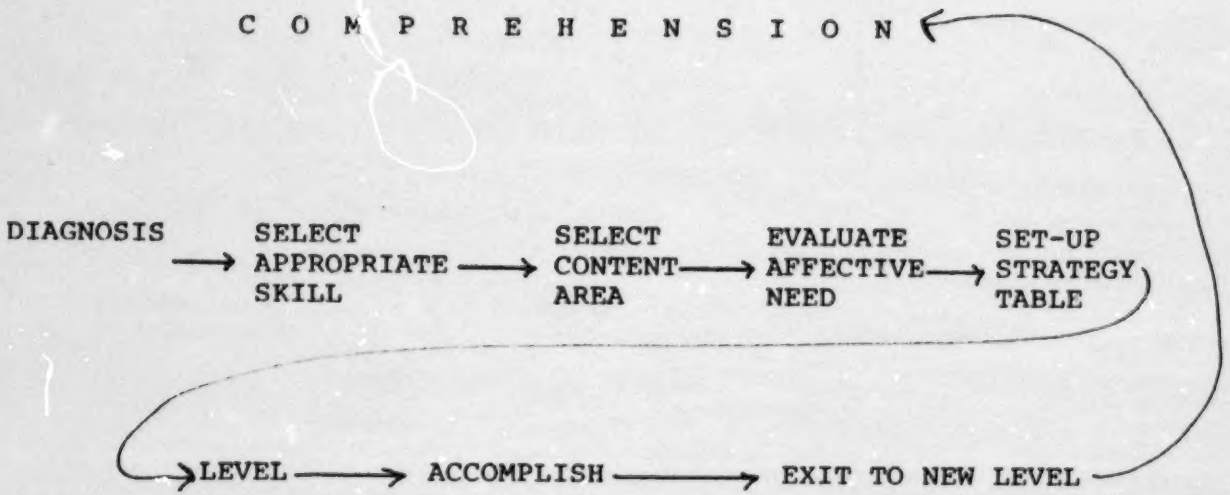
Advanced Organizers:
topic sentences
supporting ideas or details
transitional words
Roman numerals
Arabic numerals
umbrella words

Cognitive Tracking Step: The student will put the following terms into categories and will identify the umbrella terms. These umbrella terms will be assigned a Roman numeral.

outdoors	informal affairs
around the campfire	backyard picnics
indoors	costume parties
my favorite kinds of parties	birthday parties
swimming parties	treasure hunts
	in the woods

Using Advanced Organizers in the Content Presentation: The student will be given a selection to read from the textbook of the content area and will be required to identify the following: topic sentences, supporting ideas or details, transitional words, and umbrella words.

Summary: The student will take those items he has identified or underscored and assemble them into an outline.


C O M P R E H E N S I O N
DIAGNOSIS
SELECT APPROPRIATE SKILL
SELECT CONTENT AREA
EVALUATE AFFECTIVE NEED
SET-UP STRATEGY TABLE
LEVEL
ACCOMPLISH
EXIT TO NEW LEVEL

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